

Sheboygan city administrator fired after investigation. His supporters want details why.

{ HYPERLINK "<https://www.sheboyganpress.com/staff/7964665002/maya-hilty/>" }

January 10, 2023

Sheboygan Press

SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan fired city administrator Todd Wolf at a crowded city council meeting Monday.

The council voted to { HYPERLINK

"<https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/11/09/sheboygan-city-administrator-todd-wolf-leave-conduct-under-investigation/69629996007/>" } and hired an outside attorney to investigate concerns about his conduct.

The attorney finished her investigation and presented a preliminary report to the council last week, council Vice President Roberta Filicky-Peneski said. After hearing the preliminary findings, the council weighed different options and a majority felt firing Wolf without cause was the best option, city council member Dean Dekker said.

The { HYPERLINK "<https://www.sheboyganwi.gov/officials/common-council/>" } voted 8-2 to fire Wolf without cause, with Joe Heidemann and Trey Mitchell opposing the move. Many people in the audience at the meeting also opposed the move.

City leaders have said little about the findings of the nearly two-month investigation, citing personnel matters, but Mayor Ryan Sorenson said it uncovered “significant” concerns, including Wolf making false statements and becoming a legal liability for the city.

EXHIBIT

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The city chose to fire Wolf without cause, rather than for cause, to save money and “minimize the negative impact on both Wolf and other city employees,” according to the city council resolution.

{ HYPERLINK "https://www.sheboyganpress.com/picture-gallery/news/2023/01/10/sheboygan-citizens-fill-council-chambers-meeting-city-administrator/11021377002/" }

Firing Wolf for cause would have increased the city’s legal fees and drawn out the process longer, Sorenson said.

“Once the report becomes public, I hope folks will understand the difficult decision that the city council had to make tonight,” he said.

The preliminary investigation report will become public, but Sorenson does not know when. “I hope it comes sooner than later,” he said.

Because Wolf was fired without cause, the city will pay him six months’ salary — nearly \$79,000 — and benefits.

The Sheboygan Press is seeking comment from Wolf's attorney.

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Wolf made Sheboygan vulnerable to lawsuits, mayor says

Sorenson said at this point, he cannot comment on most findings of the investigation.

A { [HYPERLINK "https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/12/16/sheboygan-administrator-todd-wolf-paid-leave-attorney-says-leaders-conspired/69627676007/"](https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/12/16/sheboygan-administrator-todd-wolf-paid-leave-attorney-says-leaders-conspired/69627676007/) }, hours before the council voted to put him on administrative leave, “raised a lot of red flags,” including statements that “can be proven false” with other documentation, Sorenson said.

In the letter, Wolf made “strong accusations” that he was extorted by members of the community at an Oct. 5 meeting. Sorenson said the community members did not demand money at that meeting, where there were other city staff present. The community members have denied the allegation publicly and issued a cease-and-desist letter to the city, which put the city “in a significant legal situation,” Sorenson said.

Sheboygan already { [HYPERLINK "https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/10/27/former-sheboygan-hr-director-alleges-retaliated-against-opposing-sex-harassment/69574571007/"](https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/10/27/former-sheboygan-hr-director-alleges-retaliated-against-opposing-sex-harassment/69574571007/) }, who resigned in June after filing a complaint with the state Equal Rights Division alleging Wolf discriminated against her.

Sorenson added: "There were many different communications where Administrator Wolf was told that some of his comments are not true, and he kept doubling down on comments, even knowing that they weren't true, so that was another component that gave us significant pause."

Wolf also did not follow instructions from the council while on leave, Sorenson said.

“When you conduct an investigation like this, you ask that person not to interfere with it. You say ... keep it to yourself right now, and ... there were multiple violations of that,” he said.

More:{ HYPERLINK

"https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/10/26/sheboygan-n-word-racial-slur-incident-prompts-call-change-city/69574563007/" \t "_blank" }

People claim Wolf's firing was political. Here's how elected officials across the spectrum responded.

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Many people at the city council meeting opposed the decision to fire Wolf, especially without cause.

“This (without cause) leads me to understand — and I think everybody else in the room — that this (investigation) did not find any problems with the city administrator’s conduct,” former mayor Mike Vandersteen said.

Vandersteen said Wolf has worked “transparently and diligently” and made many notable accomplishments as administrator.

“Did Todd Wolf steal money? ... Is he a target of a witch hunt? The council has said nothing,” said Aaron Guenther, who is running for a city council seat in April. “I demand that you release the investigation ... to the public because we deserve to know.”

Russ Otten said the council wants to fire Wolf because they “don’t like the way he stood up to the demands of a far-left group.” Otten, chairman of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County, encouraged party members to attend the meeting to stand against corruption.

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Dekker said the decision was “in no way, shape or form political,” despite audience members’ comments.

“Personally, after hearing the synopsis, and weighing the options before us, I have to come to the conclusion that this is in the best interest of our employees,” Dekker said. “To take care of our employees is important to us. One employee doesn’t stand over all the rest of our employees. To put our employees through something like this is not right.”

Sorenson similarly said, after the vote, “Personnel issues are not supposed to become political issues, and I’m sad that it came down to that.”

“Nobody wants to do this. Todd and I got along great professionally,” Sorenson said. “He made some decisions that put the city in a very difficult situation, and actions have consequences. People should feel safe to come to work. People shouldn't have to be fearful of retaliation. People should have to come to work in a professional manner.”

Heidemann, who made an unsuccessful motion for the council to give Wolf a “written warning” instead of firing him, said the investigation “was far from conclusive.”

Heidemann said he cannot comment on closed session, but he said the decision is not fair to Wolf.

"Bring that out in the open, let the citizens decide," he said. "They (other council members) don’t want to do that because they can hide behind closed session. That’s not good governance.”

Mitchell, the other city council member to vote against firing Wolf, said he did not think the move was morally just and Sheboygan "is better off having had" Wolf.

"Given the public nature of last night's action, I do not believe it completely qualified as a confidential, internal personnel matter anymore," Mitchell said in an email. He could not share more information about the matter because it was discussed in closed session meetings, he wrote.

'People are angry': Sheboygan residents, elected officials respond to city administrator's handling of director repeating a racial slur

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January 9, 2023 9:50pm

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SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan is in the midst of “a public and employee relations nightmare,” city council person Betty Ackley said at the city council meeting last week.

That’s after a city director repeated a racial slur in an internal meeting and the { HYPERLINK

"https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/politics/2022/10/10/sheboygan-city-leader-uses-n-word-raising-concerns-inclusion/10380097002/" } to concerns from other staff.

The { HYPERLINK "https://www.sheboyganwi.gov/officials/common-council/" } discussed personnel issues in closed session on Monday and last week.

Mayor Ryan Sorenson assured a crowded room at a council meeting last week that elected officials are listening to residents’ concerns, while the council voiced support for equity and government transparency.

The council also drafted a resolution limiting City Administrator Todd Wolf's responsibilities, and instead giving Sorenson full responsibility for talking to the media as well as putting the process for hiring a director of Human Resources firmly in the hands of the mayor and council leadership.

The council "wishes to have the Mayor and the City Administrator focus on areas of strength," the proposed resolution states.

Wolf is no longer talking to the Sheboygan Press, according to a preliminary understanding with council leadership, he wrote in an email to city council leadership obtained through an open records request.

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In emails to city council members obtained by the Sheboygan Press, some residents called for a public apology from the city director who repeated the racial slur and a budget that prioritizes work in diversity, equity and inclusion, such as long-term work with a DEI professional.

Some residents asked council members to reevaluate City Director Chad Pelishek's and Wolf's fitness for their positions. Residents also emphasized the importance of hiring a Human Resources director and suggested investigating sexual harassment and workplace retaliation in the city.

Sheboygan has not had an active Human Resources director since November 2021, when the former director took leave after hiring an attorney to protect herself against workplace retaliation, she wrote in her resignation letter months later.

Sheboygan has { HYPERLINK

"https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/politics/2022/07/27/sheboygan-city-employee-raises-amid-ongoing-wisconsin-labor-shortage/7821635001/" }. One applicant offered the position rejected the city's offer this fall. The city administrator has since hired an outside firm to assist with hiring for the position.

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"https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2022/10/19/sheboygan-city-council-sets-15-dollar-minimum-wage-city-workers/10535637002/" \t "_blank" }

Here's the context in which a city director said a racial slur and how the city administrator responded.

After a city employee and neighborhood liaison noticed a few uncomfortable and racist incidents while attending neighborhood association meetings, including a resident saying the N-word, she asked her supervisor how to address those situations if they happen again, according to emails obtained by the Sheboygan Press.

Her supervisor, Pelishek, Sheboygan's director of planning and development, asked other city staff for guidance at an August meeting of department heads. Pelishek said the N-word while saying that a resident had said the slur at a neighborhood meeting as he asked fellow staff how the city can help address such situations.

After other city staff raised concerns, Pelishek emailed an apology to department heads. Some residents say the apology missed the mark in failing to acknowledge the harm done.

"I regret saying [sic] full N word out loud and if I offended anyone it was not intended to be directed that way. I am sorry if you were offended," Pelishek wrote.

Wolf then hired a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant to facilitate a conversation about the incident with department heads.

Wolf was concerned not that a city leader repeated the racial slur but that city staff told people outside the meeting about the incident, saying a director who “let the information out” had breached trust.

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Wolf admonishes city council for 'lack of support' in an email

After the Sheboygan Press reported on the city’s response to Pelishek repeating a racial slur, City Council President Barbara Felde emailed all city employees reminding them of the city’s Employee Assistance Program and a method to confidentially report suspected violations of the city’s code of conduct or policies.

“While we are taking the necessary steps to address concerns, we want to extend our support to our public servants and constituents,” Felde wrote. “Please know your Common Council is on standby for support.”

The following day, Wolf emailed city council leadership, including Felde, Council Vice President Roberta Filicky-Peneski and Sorenson, saying the council has failed to support city employees.

“I have dozens of employees crying, upset and ready to quit in the lack of support from the Council in this issue and many others in the last two plus years. This includes myself for the continued harassment,” Wolf wrote.

“The only support and change that the employees have said, that has been positive for the city and them has been the hiring of me into this position,” Wolf wrote. “(Alders) do not ask the people for the facts and clarification. Now is a time for the City Leadership to stand for the team that provides the service that you represent.

“The team is even scared to talk to anyone, as this is not a safe place anymore. They know more from the outside than many know from the right people in Council leadership positions.”

Wolf previously said he was “disappointed” in a city director who told a city council member, according to emails obtained by the Sheboygan Press, that Pelishek said the racial slur in an internal meeting.

More:{ HYPERLINK

"https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/10/18/sheboygan-county-sheriff-candidate-jarrod-fenner-faced-firing-lying-resigned/8208123001/" \t "_blank" }

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City council proposes limiting city administrator's responsibilities

A city council resolution proposed Monday “clarifying” the duties of the city administrator would effectively limit Wolf’s responsibilities.

Although the city administrator is employed by the council and in charge of implementing council policies on a day-to-day basis, “the various roles of the City Administrator and the Mayor have evolved, often without much involving from the Common Council,” the resolution states.

“The City Administrator has strong skills in project management, and the Common Council wishes to have him focus more time in this area of strength,” it reads. “One way to do that is to direct the City Administrator to have the Mayor handle media relations and communication.”

According to city ordinance, the director of Human Resources and Labor Relations is appointed by the council based on the recommendation from the city administrator and mayor.

Under the proposed resolution, the appointment would instead be “primarily directed by the Mayor and council leadership.”

“Having that position filled by a strong candidate is one of the Common Council’s highest priorities,” the resolution reads.

The resolution will go to the Finance and Personnel Committee before returning to the full council for approval.

Sheboygan leaders and residents respond to concerns about city leadership and equity

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At last week’s council meeting, Mayor Sorenson said equity work needs to be a “fundamental component” of city operations.

"We have a lot of progress that we have made over the last couple of months, but we still have a long way to go," Sorenson said.

“I want to reassure people that the city is not a safe space for racism and racial tropes and it can never be,” he said. “We have a lot of work ahead of us, I know we can do better and we will do better.”

The city council passed a resolution reaffirming the council’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

The council “believes that our leaders and staff need to be held to a high standard on matters of equity,” “understands that leaders shall offer no excuses for offensive behavior,” and “understands that leaders need to operate in full transparency and accountability,” the resolution states.

Sorenson said elected officials have heard from a lot constituents on how the city can improve.

“From the calls, emails and in-person conversations with residents that I have had recently about this issue, people are angry,” Ackley said. “I do not believe that (Pelishek’s) communication was becoming of someone representative of the city’s public face and leadership. I feel like all of us should be holding ourselves to a higher standard. We must be mindful of our words, even when quoting others.

“It is time to implement actionable change, it is not time to provide lip service,” Ackley said.

Russ Otten, a Sheboygan resident and chairman of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County, said during public comment at last week’s city council meeting that “it’s very sad for our community that the Sheboygan Press decided to sensationalize (this situation).”

“Every one of you council members knows that what was stated by Chad Pelishek was not stated by him but a repetition of what was stated by someone else. Yet, not one of you had the guts to defend him,” Otten said.

“Diversity is hugely important ... but diversity should be more than (race or gender). Diversity should be about diversity of thought,” he said. “When we only have one thought, and everyone has to fall in line or be ostracized, we have a problem.”

Other people in public comment and emails to city council members obtained by the Sheboygan Press called for more action by the council.

“Leadership requires the willingness to learn, the ability to model and the capacity to own one’s missteps,” said Jamie Haack, a resident and professional of diversity and inclusion work. “I urge the common council to seriously evaluate placements of Mr. Pelishek and Mr. Wolf and their current and future abilities to serve in their roles with the knowledge, transparency and values of equity and respect that are so needed in their positions.”

Brenda Richterkessing, another resident who has worked as a human resources director and taught educational seminars about sexual harassment and workplace retaliation, said in an email to the city council that, based off reporting on Wolf’s response, Wolf “is handling this in the exact opposite way than he should.”

“He sounds like someone that may be in over his head in terms of his ability to manage the leadership needed in our city,” Richterkessing wrote. “With no (Human Resources) director ... ironically because { HYPERLINK

"https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/politics/2022/10/10/sheboygan-city-leader-uses-n-word-raising-concerns-inclusion/10380097002/" } ... this is a very dangerous crisis of leadership for our city.”

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